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Book Review: Anna-Katharina Hornidge Compares Singapore and Germany in "The Knowledge Society"

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An international think tank at the forefront of critical reflections about the rise of knowledge is the research group on Culture, Knowledge and Development at the Centre for Development Policy (ZEF), University of Bonn, Germany. Anna-Katharina Hornidge is senior researcher at ZEF. Her book, *The Knowledge Society -- Vision and Social Construction of Reality in Germany and Singapore*, edited by Solvay Gerke and Hans-Dieter Evers and published in 2007 as part of ZEF's Development Studies series, is reviewed by Thomas Menkhoff, professor of organisational behaviour at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University.

Hornidge, who has done extensive field research on Singapore's and Germany's science policies, is now concentrating on renewable energies.

Knowledge Matters

The effective governance of knowledge represents a key enabler of economic growth in an era where the creation of wealth from immaterial production (services, computer-assisted production etc.) exceeds that from material production. Hornidge's book, *The Knowledge Society*, clearly goes beyond economic debates about knowledge-based development. Inspired by sociological concepts of knowledge, she argues that the hype about the 'information economy', 'knowledge economy' or 'information and knowledge society' -- terms which are often used interchangeably and without precise definitions -- is "socially constructed". This "new reality", she states, orients and motivates actors to finally create what they conceive of as being objective.

The most influential publication in the field has been the book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, by Peter L Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). They contend that people who interact with each other form, over time, mental models of each others' actions. These typifications eventually become habitualised into reciprocal roles played by the actors and, subsequently, routinised. Meaning is attached to ideas and routine practices. What people know and construct as their reality gradually becomes embedded in the institutional structure of society.

Singapore-Germany Comparison

This process of construction is carefully redrawn in Hornidge's book in which she assesses state activities and inherent, country-specific definitions of a knowledge society with reference to Germany and Singapore. Initially, the countries seem two unlikely candidates for a comparison given their different historical developments, population size, socio-cultural realities and organising principles; while Germany is a federated country, Singapore is a centralised city-state. On a second look, however, there are many similarities between Germany and Singapore. Both countries are industrialised nations with few natural resources to build on, but with the common will to conduct high-level R&D for further development. They both have ports and historical trading traditions. They have also developed into service economies and, today, increasingly rely on knowledge, the generation of ideas, innovation and creativity for economic growth. Both governments actively promote the construction of knowledge societies or 'k-societies'.

The idea of a rising k-society originated from academic circles in the US and Japan in the 1950s and 1960s, reaching Germany and other European nations at the beginning of the 1970s. In Germany the term 'information society' is mainly used as it has a long tradition in the political sphere and can be more easily explained to citizens. It can be traced back to the translation of a Japanese report, "Japan's Technological Strategy", by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Science (1972).

In Singapore, the term 'knowledge-based economy' is preferred. This is justified by the urge to develop from a third to a first world economy based on export-led growth, access to foreign technology, capital, knowledge and a competent workforce. Surprisingly, the k-societies constructed in Germany and Singapore are defined procedurally by programmes such as the Information Society Germany 2010 Action Plan initiated by the German Federal Government, and the Intelligent Nation 2015 plan developed by Singapore's Infocomm Development Authority (IDA).

Interestingly, academic concepts of a k-society created by the scientific community do not always play a major role. While both countries put heavy emphasis on an ICT and knowledge infrastructure so as to foster economic prosperity, differences exist with regard to the knowledge topoi addressed, and the defining elements of a k-society.

Singapore today, in contrast to Germany, puts more emphasis on fostering creativity and the development of creative industries. In Germany, the traditional broad definition of knowledge -- that allows for fine arts, craft and

music education, critical discussion as well as time and space for personal development, hobbies and recreation -- is slowly eroding due to the rising focus on knowledge and knowledge production.

K-society Drivers

A key question that arises from reading this insightful and well written book is this: If k-societies are indeed socially constructed and not merely the result of technological and economic developments, which 'actors' are the real drivers of the k-society shift, and how do they manage to achieve legitimacy?

As Hornidge points out, key driving forces are the scientific community which constructs k-society concepts, political elites who develop a vision (sometimes without the active contributions of scientists) of a 'self-emerging' k-society and the powerful subsystem state which constructs k-societies as stages of socio-economic development. "The political activities, legitimised by this vision, then actually constructed (and until today do) what was said to emerge by itself," states Hornidge.


Conceptions of knowledge are also strongly influenced by structural realities such as the political and legal system, historical experience and economic imperatives. For example, there is the perceived need to establish a new creative growth cluster in Singapore, or in Germany, the need to establish the legal infrastructure (e.g. digital signatures) for effectively constructing an ICT economy. Country-specific concepts of knowledge that are "inflexible or archaic" face increasing global pressures. K-society constructs in the form of economic and technological programmes represent a "new focal point of collective identity that reduces felt insecurities and risks within the second modernity," says Hornidge.


Knowledge Elites

Besides its academic value, the book sends out a powerful message to policy makers as it indirectly draws attention to the significant role of visionary knowledge elites as drivers of sustainable development. They are not always in adequate supply if one compares the different development trajectories of Asian countries such as Singapore or Sri Lanka. The continuing legitimacy of Singapore's policy makers is based on many factors such as their track record, competencies, actionable knowledge, command over resources and evidence-based (good) management.

Singapore's survival and national interests serve as ideological justifications of knowledge-based development policies, and provide meaning for those in charge as well as for a large number of its citizens. This raises several questions, such as who is supposed to assist Asian latecomers in knowledge-based development in an era of globalisation, regional integration and latent knowledge conflicts.

A civil society role model in this respect is Singapore's nominated member of parliament, Eunice Olsen. Her Water for Living, Books for Learning initiative builds libraries and provides water-filtration systems for orphanages and schools in Cambodia, Laos and Kalimantan. It is one of the flagship projects of Knowledge in Developing Societies (KIDS), a Singapore-based organisation Olsen co-founded. In these turbulent times of increasing ignorance, where an "explosion of despair" beyond the shores of Singapore can never be ruled out, one might argue that knowledge for development (K4D) assistance is of utmost importance to ensure further growth and stability in Asia.

 [back to top \(#top\)](#)

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